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# THE DOWNTOWN CHURCH

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The Christian world presents no more pathetic sight than the decayed or abandoned city church—a noble edifice built at an enormous cost, at one time the gathering-place of great assemblies, noted not merely for its message but for its benevolent activities, now deserted except by a few loyal souls who find the burden of maintenance too heavy to permit of a fresh grappling with the problem. As the congregations diminish and the exchequer becomes exhausted, the officers strain after various expedients. They look to the pulpit as their hope, and effect frequent changes in the pastorate. They must have an eloquent man, or a scholarly man, or a “good mixer,” or a man who can “deliver the goods.”

The pathos of the situation is seen in the fact that there are more people still attending the church than were present at its inception or are usually present at the inauguration of a church in a new center. When a new area is peopled by four or five thousand persons, thirty or forty earnest men and women will gather in a store or a house and organize a church, and will feel the outlook so alluring that they will launch a building scheme involving a \$25,000 or \$30,000 expenditure and look for a pastor of promise rather than one whose reputation is already made to guide and teach them.

On the other hand, the downtown church becomes a problem if it has two hundred members and a noble plant free

of debt and a population of twenty thousand non-churchgoers in its immediate vicinity.

Why? The reason is not far to seek. Those two hundred members are used to the idea that the church exists for the sake of those who desire to use it. They see the pillars of the church being removed by death; they witness the families of the church disintegrating and moving away. The established order is crumbling to ruins and they can only weep and lament over a glory that is departing. If they were beginning afresh with so large a nucleus they would advance with vigor. They are not beginning—they are dying. As a rule, the pathos of the situation is deepened by the fact that the number of children in the primary department of the Sunday school is steadily increasing while the membership of the church is decreasing.

From the feeling that something needs to be done, extraordinary developments have resulted during recent years. Preachers have thought that perhaps they could increase the congregations and raise the drooping spirits of the remnant if they adopted new methods. Hence they have given up the study of the Scriptures and the mastery of the problems of the soul and have advertised topics such as “The Man from Missouri and His Mule”; “Who Killed Cock Robin?”; or “The Famous Cow-Puncher and Baseball Player Will Preach with His Jacket Off”; or “The Wonderful

Whistler Will Perform." Then the moving picture has been introduced, and sometimes a vaudeville performer.

But the people living in the heart of a great city are not fools. When they want a show they are thoroughly well instructed as to the best places. They are usually people who think. They are not always instructed in what other people have thought, but they think for themselves. Their young men and young women will often be found to be socialists or anarchists. They discuss problems, including problems of the soul. In an American city the immigrant class usually congregates in the central areas, and these people have come from villages in lands where the church is the center of light and dignity and reverence. They are offended at the masquerade, especially when they discover that it is meant to catch them and built on the assumption that they cannot appreciate anything higher or better, while the people in the suburbs are treated to a dignified and orderly service.

Another effort has been made with a different object. It has been felt that the church of today must address itself to the needs of its neighborhood, and hence the institutional side of the work has been developed. The past decade has been a period of experimentation. We have investigated the home and social conditions of the people. We have recognized the fact that where the majority of the people have to labor for their living in large, noisy, overheated, and sometimes insanitary surroundings they cannot endure the small, over-crowded tenement during the brief period of leisure before going to bed.

The majority of them do not care to read; they crave change, brightness, variety, something to take them out of themselves. Hence the necessity of somewhere to go.

Enterprising people have provided variety shows, moving pictures, dance halls, etc., and these are always crowded. The church has imagined that they were powerful competitors and that her only hope was to provide counter-attractions. Accordingly gymnasiums, swimming-tanks, billiards, smoking-rooms, cafés, lectures, dances, and private theatricals have been provided and run at great expense. The men and women of the churches have labored hard and long in organization and supervision; money has been freely subscribed for equipment and maintenance; and often the result has been the gathering together of large numbers of young people, particularly in the initial stages of the experiment.

The movement has developed in two ways: The liberal wing has provided the center and invited the crowd, hoping that when they arrived they might be influenced and persuaded to attend lectures, to join Bible classes, and to unite in public worship. But the sponsors of the project have found that the people were not willing to accept the religious and spiritual along with the spectacular and entertaining. Furthermore, the church did not make a business of the entertainment side of its activity. It provided its attractions from benevolent motives, and since it was unable to provide the variety and change of the regular houses of entertainment, patronage soon fell off and the institutes became deserted.

The conservative wing has said that "if you will attend church and Bible

class you may take part in our recreation features." As a rule, these churches have found their institutional work an increasing burden and have had to appeal to sister churches or benevolent persons in the churches to provide them with the means whereby the work can be accomplished.

Now it is being recognized that the provision of recreation centers is not the province of the church but of the city; that as the city educates the child so the city must entertain him. The city must supervise the homes, instruct in sanitation, provide open spaces and playgrounds, crèches, and dance halls. It has been well worth while for the church to make these experiments; she could learn only by experience.

Occasionally a church imagines that what it needs to do is to take a census of its neighborhood and if it can only tabulate the size of families and the professed religious associations of the people, and give an intimation that the church premises are at the corner, the unattached will straightway respond. When the response is meager, the despondency of failure brings pain and unwillingness to experiment further.

What then *shall* a church do in the central area of a great city? It will be wise if first of all it will go out to the open spaces and watch the groups of people congregated there and listen to their conversation. The first discovery will be that these men are talking religion. They are heaping scorn on the churches on two grounds: first, because of what they are supposed to affirm; second, because of what they are supposed to represent. These people imagine that the churches hold an impossible

view of God and an impossible view of the world. The discussion is often led by a man who has read widely but from a wrong viewpoint. They further believe that the churches are supported by rich people and that the clergy do not speak truthfully and sympathetically about social conditions.

I believe that the overwhelming majority of city dwellers are not hostile to religion. In the great crises of life they cry out for the minister. Through ignorance, indifference, preoccupation, or prejudice they are not now in touch with the church. If born in America or England and of Protestant parents they had early association with the Sunday school but not with the church. The idea was instilled in their minds that children could not understand or appreciate an ordinary church service. When they reached puberty 80 per cent of them drifted out of the Sunday school and no one followed them. The door to the church seemed unattractive and the door to the outer world was alluring, so they made their escape.

In my first church I had a meeting of several hundred men. On a challenge issued from the pulpit 47 per cent declared that they did not habitually attend church except at my afternoon meeting, but every one of them had attended Sunday school as a boy.

If the city dwellers, however, are foreign born and from Lutheran or Roman Catholic countries, they do not know or understand the names of our Protestant churches. The inference is obvious. The clergyman must become known in the neighborhood, and his viewpoint must be announced. The pulpit must cease to be sensational. The topical sermon must

go. "Who Killed Cock Robin?" belongs to the vaudeville and so does "The Man from Missouri and His Mule." You would not find either subject on the curriculum of a school or college, and a church is of higher standing than school or college.

The minister must be a man of wide and accurate knowledge. The time spent in committees and in conferences must be severely restricted, so that he may become what he pretends to be if he uses the title "Reverend": a man who knows men and God, who can speak to men about God and speak to God on behalf of men. He must not be a special pleader. He must not make impossible assumptions. Supposing the Bible is a literature, supposing that it must be judged like other books, what then has he got to say about God and sin and salvation? What then has he to say about the origin of the world and of life? After more than a decade spent in downtown churches and after having experimented with the most advanced guard in all manner of institutional ideas, I affirm that the one indispensable secret of success is that the minister should know the truth and should speak it with the ability of the expert. Ministers are succeeding all the time in the hearts of great cities. They are invariably strong in pulpit work.

Few names have stood for greater things in the lives of city dwellers than Hugh Price Hughes and Charles Sylvester Horne, of London, England. These men reached city crowds in the most hopeless regions, and yet they were men whose services were characterized by a chastity and sublimity of the noblest type. The men who are doing the big-

gest things in the central churches of America are men of this type—men like Charles Jefferson, of New York.

The pastor of a downtown church must revive the old-time idea of his office as being a "cure for souls." A physician needs skill and delicacy and sympathy as well as knowledge. As a pastor he is a shepherd, and if a shepherd carries weapons he does not use them unless a wolf or robber is near. A minister is a nurse and does not treat spiritual babes as though they were Caleb's going up against the sons of Anak. The dwellers in the downtown regions are many of them idealists, dreamers, aspirants, but they are bruised and weary and ill-guided, and the man who can win in a downtown field is a man who is known to the people.

The only way to reach these people is that of personal approach. I do not mean approach by canvass, but in a way more dignified and more human. The church that is to win must be a visiting church. If the money formerly spent in the church institute can be put into skillful visitation, extraordinary results will follow. Just as the modern hospital recognizes the need of home visitation in order to create conditions which shall make it safe to send the patient back and prevent a spreading of the mischief, so the modern church must send its best and most carefully trained workers to create a spiritual condition in the homes of the district. This is particularly true of an American city where the central area is occupied to a large extent by immigrants. These people do not know our ways. They are ignorant of our money, our food, our rents, our schools, our ways of thinking. They know

nothing of terms such as Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist. They think of all churches in terms of the state church at home.

My own method has been the issuance of a letter followed by a personal call from members of my church and from myself. Every care has been taken to disabuse the mind of any idea that we were proselytizing. The methods of the business solicitor were taboo. By every means we have sought to interest people in the church and its message.

I believe that the overwhelming majority of people are interested in worship. The European settler is used to a noble edifice, to dignity and decorum in every act of the officiating clergyman. The atmosphere of the church, the language employed, the mien of those conducting the worship of God have all combined to express a sense of the august majesty of heaven. The whole service has been as remote as possible from the common thought and common action of life. How can people so reared be expected to appreciate the slovenly, noisy, irreverent action and careless speech which very often characterize the man and his officers who are in charge of a mission to the people in a downtown district?

The native-born American is not insensible to the refined, the dignified, and the reverent. An inquiry into the size of the classes in American colleges which are engaged in the study of literature and art will show that the young American is a person of taste. The development of art galleries, the character of American literature and poetry, all show that the ideal of the transcendental meets with an immediate response. And a great

need of the people is a translation into an atmosphere of reverence in which it is manifest that the soul of the preacher is filled with a sense of the sublime.

The force of my argument will be appreciated if in addition to the experience of institutional churches we consider the results of forty years' work in the Young Men's Christian Association. The good accomplished by this agency is incalculable. The maintenance of the work should be accepted as a responsibility by the Christian church. Yet all Y.M.C.A. workers admit that the proportion of members who attend the Bible classes and religious services is regrettably small. The men go for social and recreative purposes. They believe in a religious atmosphere, but they have not joined for that reason and they neglect that side of Y.M.C.A. activity.

I believe, therefore, that the time has come when we should frankly hand over to the community on the one hand, and to the Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A., along with the settlements, on the other hand, the care of the recreative, educational, and sanitary life of the people, and in our churches concentrate upon the shepherding of the multitude and the culture of the soul.

Let the downtown church be a "witnessing" church; let its pulpit be occupied by the big man with a big message, the man who speaks with authority and is manifestly a "teacher come from God." This is largely the method of the Catholic church and of the established church in England. The clergy are known in every home, and the preacher is set apart to prepare and to make known the word and the will of God.